

The Ballarat Naturalist

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Feb. 2023 Guest Speaker's report : Ian Ashton:
-Topic Birds of the Western Treatment Plant

These days, the Western Treatment Plant is “hallowed ground” for Victoria’s birdwatchers. It was established in the 1890s to treat sewage and liquid waste from the western side of the Melbourne metropolitan area. Ever- evolving, it has at times supported various agricultural endeavours and even housed a small village of workers’ families. Ongoing improvements in efficiency and our reduced water usage have meant that not all of its 110 sq.km. is now needed for treatment purposes, but it remains great habitat under the protection of Ramsar listing.

Ian (long time member of Birdlife Ballarat and recognised as a highly-skilled birder) showed us a map of its complex structure, with a series of linked lagoons, connecting roads and a sometimes rocky coastal section edged by tidal flats. This is so valuable for birds, with water all year and leftover nutrients attracting plenty of insects and waterlife to eat – with low tide revealing more food, and invertebrates in the rich mudflats. With the additional presence of coastal vegetation, scrubby areas and some nearby tall trees, it attracts a very wide range of bird species, with 295 currently listed. Popular areas for suitably licenced birdwatchers and their guests include Lake Borrie (with dead trees and old nesting boxes popular with roosting birds), Kirk’s Point and T Section Lagoon Pond #4. Unfortunately, not much is seen from the bird hide.

With these favourable conditions, large numbers of local and migratory species can be seen, often at relatively close quarters. Large flock movements provide quite a spectacle in pleasant rural surroundings. The many attractive species include: brolgas, pelicans, egrets, both spoonbills, all three ibis, many ducks,

Common Greenshank



oystercatchers, numerous raptors, etc. A profusion of often migratory shorebirds scurry around: stints, sandpipers, stilts, green-shanks, godwits, etc.

The remarkable numbers of shorebirds can present a challenge with identification. Ian highlighted several common species of terns, pointing out notable distinguishing features to divide them. His many years of experience have helped him to look for the black bellies of the Whiskered Tern, the “headphone” like markings of the White-winged Black Tern, (featured) etc.



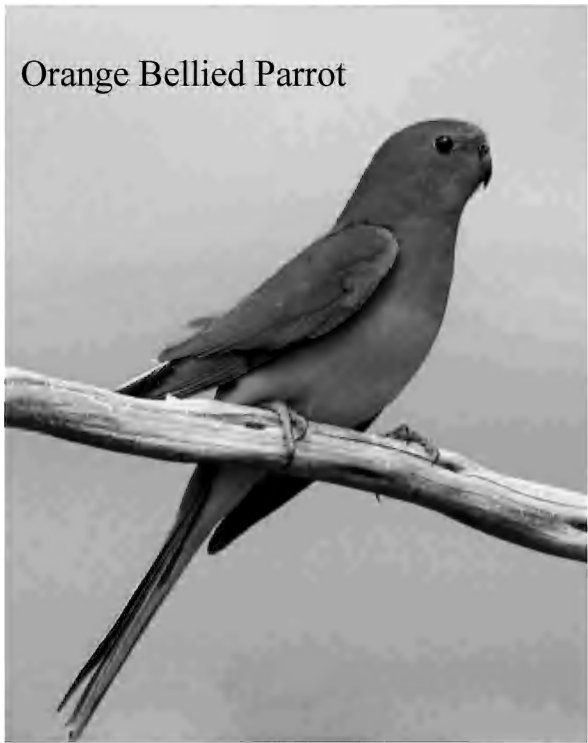
This is a complicated business, particularly as features often change as birds mature or go through breeding cycles. Field guides do not often feature these multiple guises, though Ian did recommend The Australian Bird Guide, and its compact companion, from the CSIRO. He suggests building up observational skills at Lake Goldsmith or Clunes swamps, preferably in the company of a more experienced companion. (This is, of course, a feature of Birdlife Ballarat’s activities.)

For the more seasoned birdwatchers, the real lure of Werribee is the possibility of spotting an extremely rare bird. These may be blown in during freak storms, or somehow get off course during migrations. It could be a Pacific Golden Plover, or a Hudsonian Godwit, or a Red-necked Phalarope. Our Australian Orange-bellied Parrot, so endangered, has been seen there resting from the annual Tasmanian migration. Word of rarities spreads through social media, inspiring hopeful visits and dedicated efforts from keen photographers. The satisfaction of spotting such birds in the avian crowds gives long pleasurable memories, as in the recollections Ian shared with us. Similarly, he recalled the successes of Helen O’Donnell and Wally Coles, his Birdlife Ballarat colleagues. Certainly, highlight moments of their many birding years.

Perhaps most importantly, the Western Treatment Plant is a crucial link in the East Asian - Australian Flyway Partnership. This is the

path taken by three-quarters of the shorebirds there, with some undertaking extra-ordinary annual migrations even beyond this region. Minute transmitters now verify this, with, for example, the Bar-tailed Godwit recorded as flying 13,500km from Alaska without stopping. Those birds which pause for sustenance can find their usual wetlands degraded or even drained for development. Amid work to curtail this loss, Werribee is a fine contribution to the survival of so many remarkable species. -

Shirley Faull



Immature Swamp Harrier



Excursion Report to the Western Treatment Plant
5 February 2023

The excursion to WTP followed on from the February meeting at which Ian Ashton was guest speaker. Ian outlined the history of WTP and showed excellent photographs of many birds. He also explained the features to look for on the birds to correctly identify the species.

On Sunday morning 12 Field Nats met in Buninyong to travel through light showers on the way to Geelong and on to WTP. The first stop was at the T-section lagoons. We had just begun looking over the ponds when Susan and David joined us.



Royal Spoonbills (featured) were busy feeding along the shallow edges. Some Australian White Ibis were also present. There were a variety of ducks – Black Duck, Grey Teal, Chestnut Teal, Australasian Shoveler.

A nearby pond was crowded with hundreds of Australian Shelduck which were the most numerous species seen throughout the day.



Swamp Harriers flew low over the ponds. We were able to distinguish the adults with a white rump from juvenile birds which have a tawny rump.



A pair of Brolga were standing in the aquatic vegetation. This close view was especially appreciated by one of our new members who had her first sighting of Brolga.

A Buff-banded Rail was seen briefly as it disappeared into the vegetation.

Following last year's high rainfall most of the ponds were full. There were few muddy edges for migratory waders. We were able to see Common Greenshank and Marsh Sandpiper.

We entered the main section of WTP off Beach Road and travelled a short distance to a patch of basalt rock on the edge of Port Phillip Bay. The tide was high, so many birds were clustered together on the rocks. Sharp-tailed Sandpiper, Curlew Sandpipers and Red-necked Stint were common. Australian Pied Oystercatchers were feeding on the sand.

Terns were difficult to identify. Crested Terns were present. White-winged Black Tern were identified by the black "earphones" on their heads.

After lunch, Susan led us to a pasture paddock where we saw 35 Cape Barren Geese (right) grazing on the grass. This was the largest group that most people had seen at WTP.

On the way back to Beach Road we stopped at Lake Borrie. Duck numbers are lower than usual – ducks have spread out to the many wetlands that are available.

During the excursion we saw a total of 56 species.

John Gregurke

Photos Carol Hall

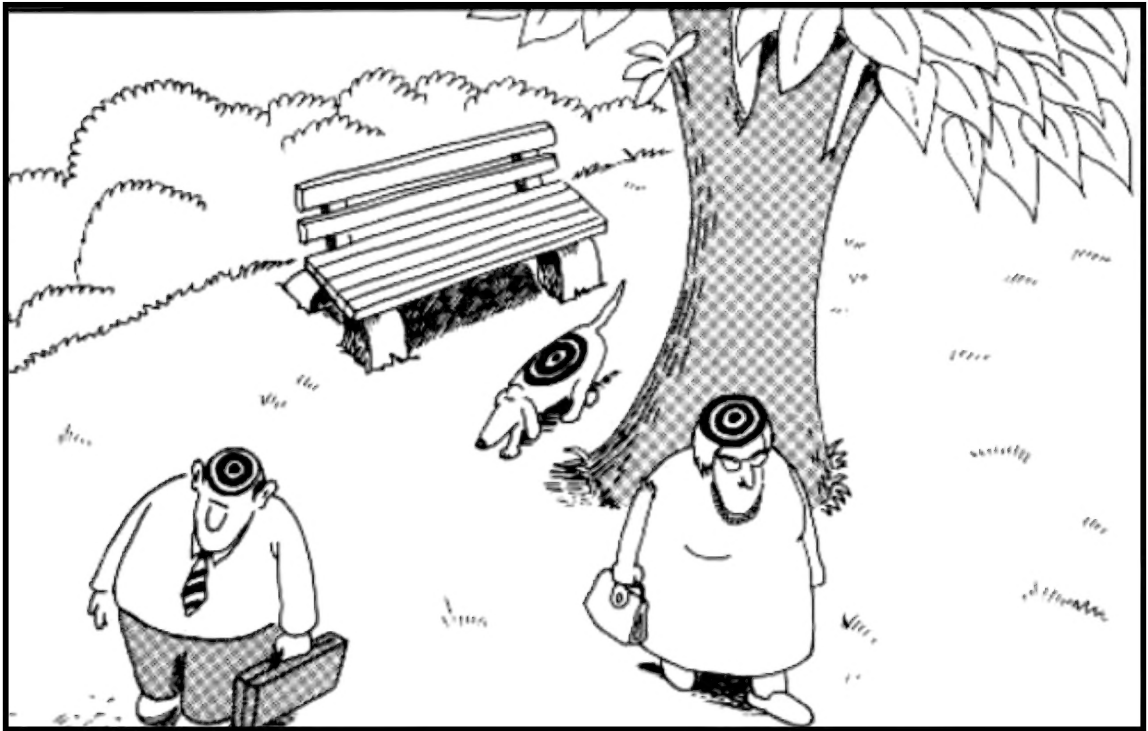


Bird List, FNCB Excursion Sunday 5th February 2023, Western Treatment Plant

Musk Duck	Sharp-tailed Sand piper
Black Swan	Curlew Sandpiper
Cape Barren Goose	Australian Pied Oystercatcher
Australian Shelduck	Pied Stilt
Australasian Shoveler	Red-capped Plover
Pacific Black Duck	Masked Lapwing
Grey Teal	Pacific Gull
Chestnut Teal	Silver Gull
Australasian Grebe	Crested Tern
Hoary-headed Grebe	White-winged Black Tern
Little Pied Cormorant	Superb Fairy-wren
Pied Cormorant	White-browed Scrubwren
Little Black Cormorant	White-fronted Chat
Australian Pelican	Magpie-lark
White-faced Heron	Willie Wagtail
Australian White Ibis	Australian Magpie
Royal Spoonbill	Little Raven
Yellow-billed Spoonbill	Australian Pipit
Black Kite	House Sparrow
Whistling Kite	Welcome Swallow
Swamp Harrier	Tree Martin
Australian Hobby	Fairy Martin
Brolga	Australian Reed Warbler
Buff-banded Rail	Little Grassbird
Purple Swamphen	Golden-headed Cisticola
Dusky Moorhen	Common Starling
Eurasian Coot	
Marsh Sandpiper	
Common Greenshank	
Red-necked Stint	Total 56 Species



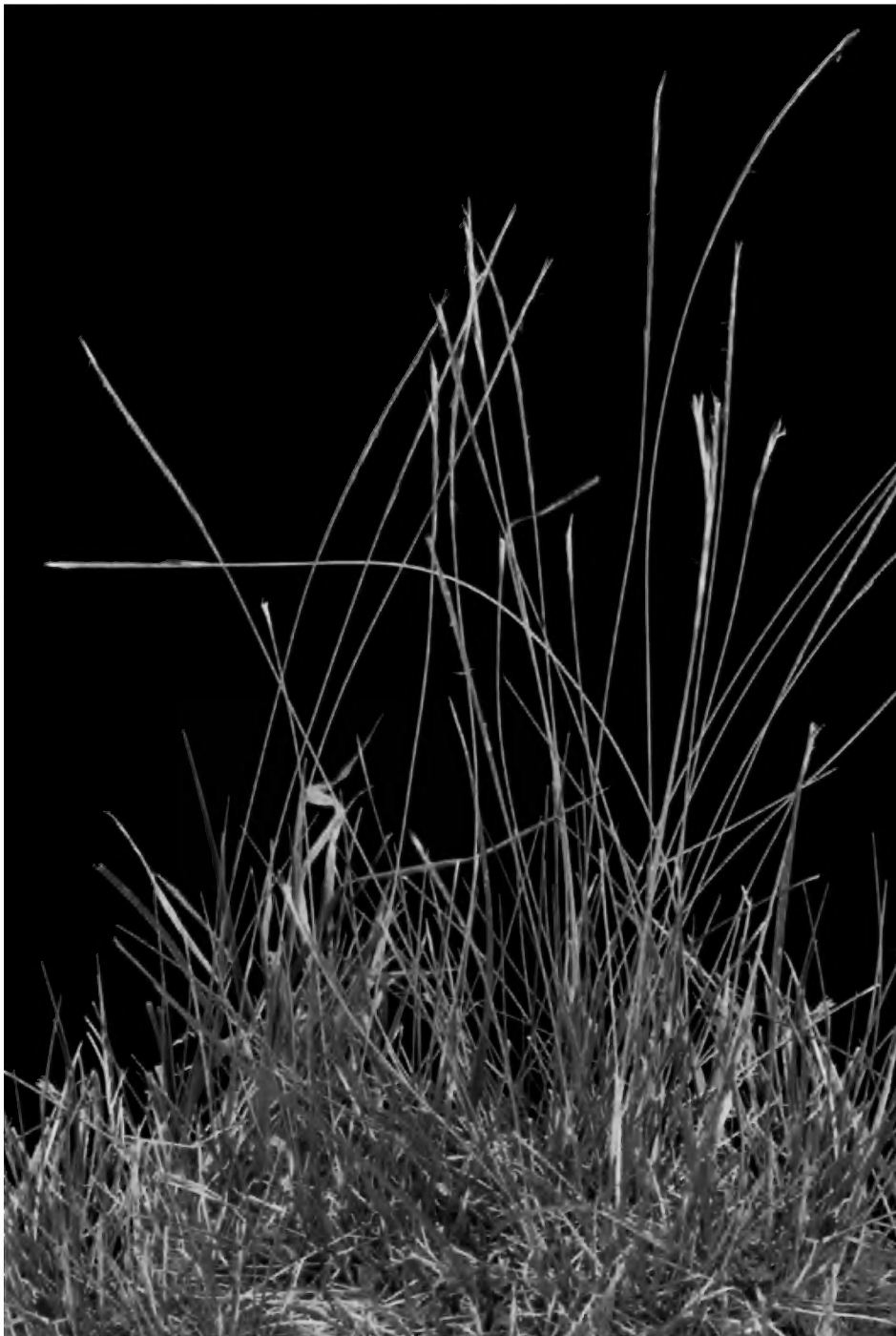
Red Capped Plover



How birds see the world

Weed of the Month - Gorse (*Ulex europaeus* L.) Matgrass (*Nardus stricta*)

This little grass may not be that familiar to even the most keen-eyed Field Nats in Ballarat. The reason is that it is not a common grass in Victoria, nor indeed in mainland Australia. In fact, the only official Australian records of this European, west Asian and northern American plant are from western Tasmania.



So why bother featuring this plant in our regular Weed of the Month section?

Well, it just so happens that *Nardus stricta* has recently been found in Victoria, by none other than Mr. Ian Clarke. Members should remember Ian as a visiting botanist who presented and led an excursion last year. Ian has worked with the National Herbarium and Melbourne University Botany department and more recently, he helps out with the Landcare group based in Apollo Bay.

The specimen of Matgrass pictured left was discovered and photographed by Ian and a GORCAPA* officer, who also loaded the record onto iNaturalist under the unlikely name of “susanpteranodon”. According to Ian, this is the first sighting of *Nardus stricta* in mainland Australia (although as yet unconfirmed). It was introduced to New Zealand and Tasmania, possibly in the 20th century.

Nardus stricta is a non-native, perennial grass with the potential to out-compete desirable grasses in intensively grazed areas. Because of its quite rough foliage it is not favoured by grazing animals, and therefore has a competitive edge. The iNaturalist images show a specimen that resembles a tough, tussock grass.

N. stricta quickly becomes weedy in good conditions, not surprisingly conditions of cool and wet pasture type environments. According to the “Invasive Plants Atlas of the USA” website, it occurs in damp areas near swamps, estuaries and watercourses. It is unusual in that it produces unbranched flower-spikes that carry the single-flowered spikelets along one side only. Matgrass flowers from June until August in the northern hemisphere and in summer in Australia. The tiny spikelets can produce enough seed during each blooming to make it problematic.

So, while you’re out and about doing your Field Naturalist thing, keep your eyes peeled for this plant. Imagine being one of the first to find one in and around Ballarat! Fame and fortune beckon! But seriously, finding a new weed like this early in the piece can mean it can be controlled and eradicated before it becomes destructive. Once a weed gets going in an area, it can be difficult and expensive to treat and control. How wonderful it would be to nip this one in the bud!

Bill Elder

Notes from our Club Meeting February 3, 2023

Held in person and via Zoom

President Margaret Rich welcomed 17 members and three visitors attending in person and five members and two visitors attending via Zoom

Syllabus Item: “Birds of the Western Treatment Plant”: was presented by Ian Ashton, BirdLife Ballarat, highlighting some of the incredible birds that travel up to 13,500km to get to Werribee to feed and breed. Shirley kindly volunteered to write it up for the newsletter

Elspeth attended a photo-shoot on Sunday 11 Dec. for a media release protesting VicForest’s salvage logging in Wombat Forest as an FNCR representative. Elspeth showed members the two posters she made to use at the photo shoot that can now be used at future events.

Vireya wrote-up a wonderful, comprehensive report of FNCR’s participation in the Great Southern BioBlitz for the Club’s February newsletter.

We welcomed Siobhan Rogan back as a member

The Committee has provisionally accepted an offer from the Biodiversity Heritage Library (managed by Museums Victoria) to digitise and collate our newsletters from 1970, to be freely shared online through the Library. The logistics include redaction of member’s contact or address details and putting an embargo on the last year’s newsletters, so access to them continues to be a benefit of membership.

Sunday’s Excursion to the “Western Treatment Plant” to be led by John Gregurke. This site is only accessible by people with permits, or those car-pooling with them. The final two places were snapped up quickly by members attending the meeting.
Excursion details: leaving 8.30 am from Gillies St

Vale Dulcie Brooke: A few members took the opportunity to share a memory or two, Carol mentioned that the eulogy from Dulcie’s funeral will be available to read on Harrison’s Funerals website for a few more weeks.

Syllabus planning for 2023/24

This year’s diverse Calendar of Activities is coming along really well, with just three of our hoped-for guest speakers yet to confirm their availability.

In very exciting news, Leon Costermans has agreed to present this year’s Stella Bedggood Memorial Lecture.

We are yet to finalise field trip destinations and leaders, with a number of “Discovering Ballarat’s Bushland” sites that are up for revision hopefully in the Calendar.

Let us know if you have any special requests/ or can offer to lead an excursion

We also ask that members volunteer to write up a summary of Friday night guest speaker talks or the Excursion for the Newsletter
We will email a schedule to everyone for this

Treasurer's Report

Opening bal. (as at Dec. 2):	\$8,367.86
Income	\$441.90
Expenses:	\$108.48
Closing bal.:	\$8,701.28

Motion: that the Treasurer’s Report be accepted and tabled invoices be approved for payment.
Moved: K. Elder Seconded: C. Hall Carried.

Vale Dulcie Brooke

Dulcie lived a long life of varied interests and of contribution to the community as well as her family. In her years of club membership we knew about her keen bushwalking interest, her voluntary guiding at the Ballarat Art gallery and her active support for Motor Neurone Disease, having cared for a life partner suffering the debilitating illness.

Dulcie frequently wore a cornflower pin to raise awareness of MND and raised funds to facilitate research.

Dulcie was a keen member of FNCB She attended our meetings when able and loved reading our newsletters when attendance wasn’t possible. Visits from her daughter Angela always included sharing photos and stories of the latest flora or fauna sightings

Show & Tell/ Field Reports

- Emily reported the exciting discovery of another new orchid species for Enfield State Park:- the Horned Orchid, *Orthoceras strictum*. A single specimen was found near Large Tongue-orchids *Cryptostylis subulata* at Beacon Hill on January 19 by orchid enthusiasts from Bendigo.

- John G told us about the possums at his place in Wendouree. Whilst in the early days he had Brush-tailed Possums in the vent above his stove, excitingly this year he has recorded three Ringtail Possums who land on his flat roof at about 9.20pm each night before running along the electric wire above the road and down the power pole.

- Graeme showed footage of Boobook Owls, a kookaburra, and a rat chasing an Agile Antechinus recorded in January by wildlife cameras set up around his Lal Lal property.

- Carol reported an unfamiliar, beach-washed, blue-grey bird with a white breast she found on a Victorian Nature Photography Group trip to Anglesea. It was subsequently identified from her photographs by Ian Ashton, Roger Thomas and Rohan Clarke as a Fairy Prion. They came across two other Fairy Prions on the same trip.

Carol added that, whilst out with the U3A Orchid Group in Enfield State Park, they too found Horned Orchids (three) in a slightly different location to the one reported above by Emily, Large Tongue-orchids *Cryptostylis subulata* and lots of Rosy and Spotted Hyacinth-orchids (*Dipodium roseum* and *D. pardalinum*), as well as an Elbow Orchid *Thynninorchis huntianus* at another site in Enfield SP.

Andy spotted a Black Wallaby *Wallabia bicolor* surrounded by the sea at the end of the southern training wall that defines the entrance to Port Fairy Harbour. When some photographers got closer than it was comfortable with, it jumped into the water and swam a substantial distance all the way across the embankment back to the rocky shore on Griffiths Island. Another wallaby was watching from the shore and they eventually paired up and moved away together. (There is a small population on the Island which has been there for many years. He remembers seeing them there in the mid 1970s)

Peter D told us about two male Musk Ducks who were feeding near the shore at Lake Wendouree before they almost ran out of the water, being herded out quite aggressively by a third male Musk Duck.

Seana Autumn Camp Port Campbell April 28th– 30th

Registrations are now being invited and forms available. Evening meals provided on Saturday and Sunday. Accommodation and other meals not included

Email – Helen

Sally

Mail to. — Timboon Field Naturalists Club

Early Notice—South East Australian Naturalists Association (SEANA) Camp in Spring (October 20-23). This year, it will be based in Yarram and hosted jointly by the Latrobe Valley FNC and Sale & District FNC.

Our Club is a member of SEANA so all of our members are entitled to attend SEANA Camps. They are always a wonderful event with like-minded nature-enthusiasts. Their program of events to choose from includes a whale cruise and maritime museum visit, birding, botanising, learning about seagrasses restoration, mangroves, coastal vegetation.

Registration forms were recently emailed with accommodation details to enable early booking of your sleeping quarters

A mystery solved

Vireya saw this striking moth during our field trip to Illabarook in October 2018, but its identity has remained a mystery until now.

It was recently identified on iNaturalist as *Tanyzancla marionella* by Matt Campbell, a member of the Entomological Society of Victoria.

There are only 10 iNaturalist observations of this species so far, spread between Keith in SA and Wilson's Prom in Vic. It turns out one of those other observations was by Sue Kruss, at Steiglitz in 2020.



The inaugural Moorabool Mushroom Festival, - a big event to be held in Ballan this April 15-16th

The FNCB Committee has decided to show its support for this highly anticipated event by leaving our Calendar of Activities open on this weekend for members to attend this festival and its various presentations/ events, to be presented by noted experts in the field of mycology

Members are encouraged to go at a time that suits them, rather than our club organising a group field trip for April. We warmly encourage you to attend and recommend that you book early if you'd like to attend a fungi foray or particular presentations (there are many to choose from on a huge range of fungi-related themes). Entry to the art exhibition and marketplace is free of charge.

To see more details about the event,
head to <https://myco.org.au/fungi-festival/>

We're pleased to let you know that the Event Coordinator for the festival, Ema Corro, will be the guest speaker at our Club Meeting on Friday 2nd June, the perfect lead-up to our Fungi field trip on Sunday 4th June

Our Newsletter production. And deadlines

It would be appreciated if all reports of meetings and excursions could be sent to the Editor as soon as possible after the event and *no later than 2 weeks afterwards*. This will allow 5 days to finalise the Newsletter before it needs to be proof read and sent to the Printers.

Thanks Val

The April Newsletter.

Can each contributor to the March Members night please send a summary of your talk and perhaps a photo, to share with our readers in the April Edition

Other items such as Postcards or Weed items also invited at any time

Our Next meeting Friday March 3rd will be our AGM—Nomination forms are available from Emily

Followed by a normal club meeting Members night- Images on the Topic of “ Natural Engineering”

Please bring along a USB with a few photos to share and a 5 to 10-minute long story highlighting an aspect of natural engineering. For instance, this could be spider's webs, bird's nests, cocoons, burrows, ant mounds, borer paths, buttress roots, leaf veins, seed dispersal, mechanisms, wings, etc.

Please note: If you are going to attend via Zoom, please email your images to Graeme by midday Friday 3rd March.

Note from the Treasurer- FNCB Annual Membership

Reminder to all members that membership will be due after the AGM on March 3. *The committee has recommended that membership amounts remain the same for this year, but this won't be ratified until after the AGM. So please hold off making any payment until after March 3.*

The preferred method for you to pay is via direct deposit into the FNCB bank account.

Account Name: Field Naturalists Club of Ballarat Inc.

BSB: 633 000 Account Number: 119112290.

Please quote your name as the reference.

I can accept payment in person but not until the April meeting as I will not be there at the AGM but will present my yearly financial report to you all via Zoom.

Note - new members who have just joined and paid in full in January or February, 2023 do not need to pay again until the AGM in 2024.

Kathy Elder Treasurer

Melton Excursion Mar 5th Details . The departure time will be 9.30am at Fed Uni Gillies St.. We will meet Elspeth at the Gordon overpass unless someone else is confident on leading vehicles to the Melton Botanic Gardens visitor carpark in 40 Lakewood Blvd. Distance from Ballarat about 80km.

The gardens are flat and there is a fair bit of walking depending on what we want to see, there is also lots of seating. Morning tea will be before beginning the first walk which will be around the more natural areas. Lunch will probably be near the larger lake and followed by a walk around the rest of the gardens

Excursions and Meetings coming up

Friday March 3rd 7.30 pm at corner of Gillies St & Gregory St,
Wendouree or via Zoom
AGM and members Images—theme— Natural Engineering

Sunday March 5th Excursion Melton Botanic gardens leaving Fed
Uni Gillies st 9.30 am

Future events noting that because of Good Friday, our next meeting
date is

Friday April 14th speaker Marilyn Hewish Hidden Treasures –
Moths of Victoria

Sat or Sunday April 15/16th Moorabool Mushroom Festival-at
Ballan: Members to make their own arrangements

Autumn SEANA Camp April 28th—30th Port Campbell
hosted by Timboon FNC

Next Committee meeting Tuesday 28th March 7.30 pm by zoom

Committee

President	Margaret Rich
Secretary	Emily Noble
Treasurer	Kathy Elder
Committee	Andy Arnold
	Bill Elder
	Val Hocking
	Graeme Lunt
	John Petheram

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Editor: Val Hocking

Treasurer Kathy Elder

Website: <http://fieldnatballarat.wordpress.com>

Club email: ballaratfnc@gmail.com

Meetings - in person and may continue to be held via Zoom.
Members will be kept informed of arrangements each month.

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